



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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By: Maj. Guy Hayes

Alaska National Guardsmen Rescue Five People on Knik Glacier

CAMP DENALI, Alaska— The Alaska National Guard rescued five individuals involved in an aircraft crash on Knik Glacier Sunday.

The 11th Rescue Coordination Center contacted the 210th, 211th and 212th Rescue Squadrons Sunday afternoon after a 406 Mhz personal locator beacon notified the RCC of a potential mishap at approximately 1 p.m. Sunday afternoon.

The beacon identified a plane belonging to a Palmer resident that was on a one hour sightseeing trip with four friends from Galveston, Texas.

"The pilot had taken his father's plane on a sightseeing trip from Palmer over the Knik Glacier," said Tech. Sgt. Kenneth Bellamy, rescue coordination center controller, Alaska Air National Guard. "They were scheduled to return to Palmer, but the 406 beacon gave us coordinates that the plane was on Knik Glacier."

Weekend alert crews with the Alaska Air National Guard were contacted and immediately reported to base and launched an HH-60 Pave Hawk and HC-130 Hercules with pararescuemen onboard to the coordinates, which is located at approximately the 8500 foot level of Knik Glacier.

"Weather at those high altitudes and the cloud deck prevented us from getting to the aircraft," said Bellamy. "With it getting late and the weather not improving, we started to look at alternative means of getting help to the people up there."

To add to the urgency of the situation, the people involved in the aircraft mishap did not have any survival gear and according to the family were only wearing light clothing when they departed.

At approximately 10 p.m. a Guardian Angel team, consisting of combat rescue officer Maj. Jesse Peterson and pararescuemen Master Sgt. Al Lankford and Tech. Sgt.'s Chris Uriarte and Angel Santana were inserted at a lower elevation to hike to coordinates of the locator beacon.

"The Guardian Angel team was inserted about 4 miles away from the aircraft site with shelter, food and gear," said 1st. Lt John Romspert, combat rescue officer, 212th Rescue Squadron, Alaska Air National Guard.

Unfortunately weather conditions, to include blizzard like conditions, cloud cover from the ground to 13,000 feet and 70 mile per hour winds delayed the ground crew from reaching the crash victims people and attempts from the air to get to the distressed crew was blocked due to inclement weather.

Using mountaineering skis and towing sleds full of gear that weighed 100-150 pounds each, two of the four members of the Guardian Angel team reached the downed aircraft Monday night and was able to provide much needed food and resources to the five people on scene.

"We we're split up into to two teams of two and with the white-out conditions on the glacier, we were separated from each other," said Lankford. "There were some pretty hairy crevasses to cross and we ended up travelling about 2,000 feet up the glacier, but we eventually made it to the crash site too."

Poor weather conditions on Knik Glacier and the crash of a single-engine float plane carrying former Sen. Ted Stevens, 17-miles north of Dillingham, had the 11th Rescue Coordination divert the Alaska Air National Guard HH-60 Pave Hawk and HC-130 Hercules to assist late Monday night.

On Tuesday, the 11th Rescue Coordination Center, requested support from an Alaska State Trooper helicopter, but after several attempts to reach the crash site at the 8,500 foot level of the glacier had to return to Palmer airport due to continued poor weather conditions.

Later in the afternoon two Alaska Army National Guard UH-60 Black Hawks returning from a mission in Fairbanks were asked to assist in the response efforts of the aircraft crash. One of the Black Hawks reportedly landed on Knik Glacier, but sustained heavy damage when it slid and rolled over on Knik Glacier. The three crew members onboard and were uninjured and the second Black Hawk returned to base.

The RCC immediately dispatched an Alaska Air National Guard HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter and HC-130 to the scene with additional supplies and hopes of rescuing the 12 people stranded on the glacier.

With a break in the weather, the Guard was able to rescue three of the original plane crash victims; Mary Jan, Patrick and David Lantz from Galveston, Texas. They dropped another week's worth of supplies and took the three Texans to the Palmer airport to be re-united with family.

Unfortunately weather conditions closed the window on making a second rescue attempt Tuesday night and the final two plane crash victims from Sunday; Donald Erbey and Fred Lantz were still on the glacier with the seven Alaska National Guardsmen.

Wednesday morning finally provided the opportunity the Alaska National Guard was counting on. With good communication between the RCC and the Guardsmen on the glacier, they were able to relay an opening in the weather.

At approximately, 12:30 p.m., an Alaska National Guard HH-60 Pave Hawk was able to land on the glacier and ferry the remaining personnel to a lower elevation in the Knik River valley.

"The fact the HH-60 reached us is a true testament to the helo crew, because it was very challenging weather conditions they were flying in" said Lankford. "Everything was white, so we set-up our skis as a lane so they could use them as a reference and even popped smoke to help them with wind on the glacier."

With everyone safely off the glacier, Erbey and Lantz were taken to Mat-Su Regional Hospital where they were re-united with family and friends.

The Alaska Army National Guardsmen and Air National Guardsmen were taken to the Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson.

"Alaska provides exceptional challenges, which allow the great men and women of the Alaska National Guard the opportunity to excel at what they do and to come through every time," said Maj. Gen. Thomas H. Katkus, adjutant general, Alaska National Guard. "Each of these events provides unparalleled training and prepares them to save lives while deployed around the world or working right here at home."

The Alaska Air National Guard was credited with 8 saves for this mission.

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Cutlines:

Air Refueling

An Alaska Air National Guard HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter prepares to aerial refuel with an HC-130 over the Knik Glacier during a rescue mission of five survivors of a plane crash Aug. 8. Photo by Master Sgt. Sean Mitchell, Alaska Air National Guard

Pave Hawk

An Alaska Air National Guard HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter waits five miles from the Knik Glacier crash site for the weather to clear before making another attempt to reach the survivors of a plane crash Aug. 8. Photo by Master Sgt. Sean Mitchell, Alaska Air National Guard